

Ethiopia and the United States: Some Key Issues

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The official U.S.-Ethiopian relationship hit a bump in the road last fall and both sides are still trying to regain their equilibrium. The proximate cause was Ethiopian unhappiness over U.S. silence on Prime Minister Meles' five-point plan for ending the disagreement concerning the demarcation of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border. But there were a number of other issues that preceded and followed that event. This was not the first setback in relations and it will not be the last. In fact, if you review official ties going back to 1903, they are marked by regular disagreements irrespective of the governments in Addis Ababa and Washington. Each time in the past the two countries overcame their differences, although it took the better part of seventeen years in the case of the Derg government that ruled from 1974 to 1991. In the grand scheme of things, the current tiff is pretty minor.

Since the outbreak of World War II, relations between the U.S. and Ethiopia have been consistently important and unusually complex. It is a mistake to assess the ties in the context of any single issue such as the Ethiopian democratization process, the Ethiopian-Eritrean border dispute, other regional issues, trade, counterterrorism, U.S. assistance or food emergencies. All of these questions and more form a complicated mixture that can not be disaggregated easily. Eventually, the most recent downturn will pass and the basic strength of Ethiopian-American relations will reassert itself.

Before commenting on the current situation, let me explain briefly why Ethiopia is important to the U.S. Ethiopia is critical to stability or instability in the Horn of Africa. If you have stability in Ethiopia, it will improve the prospect for stability elsewhere in the region. If you have instability, it will almost guarantee instability in one or more neighboring country. Ethiopia is the key to the Horn. The Horn serves as the back door to the Middle East. The Middle East is essential to greater Western interests.

Ethiopia is the 16th most populous country in the world today. According to the World Bank, in 2002 Ethiopia passed Egypt as the second most populous country in Africa after Nigeria. The United Nations Population Division projects that by 2050 Ethiopia will become the 9th most populous country in the world after Brazil.

Ethiopia has one of the strongest military organizations in Africa. Unlike most armies on the continent, it is battle tested. Because of its large population, it has a significant pool of young men to draw from in order to ramp up its military. Among African countries, Ethiopia has an impressive air power capability. It has comported

itself well in UN peacekeeping operations dating back to Korea in the 1950s, the Congo in the early 1960s, the India-Pakistan Observation Mission and more recently in Rwanda, Liberia, and Burundi. It has one of the more efficient and effective internal security and intelligence systems on the continent.

For more than 100 years, with the exception of the Derg government that accepted far more Soviet loans for military equipment than it could ever hope to repay, Ethiopia has operated under a generally conservative fiscal policy. During the 1998-2000 war with Eritrea, it surprised many outsiders by coming up with cash squirreled away in special accounts to help pay the cost of war. As a result of this conservative policy and with the help of the international community during times of famine, Ethiopia has been able to survive some sharp economic shocks. Addis Ababa also serves as the headquarters for the African Union and Economic Commission for Africa, making it a center for Africa-wide diplomacy.

There is a large Ethiopian diaspora in the U.S. and the numbers continue to grow significantly each year as a result of the diversity visa program and family members joining those already here. The diaspora remains strongly divided on developments and issues inside Ethiopia. Increasingly, however, whether Ethiopian-Americans agree or disagree with the government in Addis Ababa, they are contributing by means of remittances and support for non-governmental organizations in a positive way to developments back home. Certain congressional districts have learned that they must pay close attention to their Ethiopian-American constituencies.

Ethiopia also faces some serious challenges. It must reverse almost two millennia of autocratic rule, albeit often benign, before it can become a truly democratic country. Three rounds of national parliamentary elections (the third one taking place this month) since the current government took power in 1991 will not completely reverse this historical pattern.

Following the independence of Eritrea, Ethiopia became a land-locked country. In fact, it became the most populous land-locked country in the world. This has exacerbated its economic problems, which were serious enough even when it had a coast line. The break in relations with Eritrea following the 1998 war, now works to the detriment of both countries. Ethiopia, Sudan, and Eritrea have a history of supporting opposition groups in neighboring countries. Although this is not occurring now between Ethiopia and Sudan, it is taking place in the case of Eritrea. Ethiopia supports a coalition of Eritrean organizations opposed to the government in Asmara while the Oromo Liberation Front has its headquarters in and operates out of Eritrea.

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the World Bank, 82 percent of Ethiopia's population lives on less than one dollar per day. This is a very high percentage even for Africa. These statistics can be, however, misleading in the case of an agricultural country like Ethiopia that depends heavily on a barter economy where the informal economy does not enter official statistics. Ethiopian life expectancy is 10th from the bottom for all of Africa. Even Sudan and Somalia have a higher life

expectancy. On the other hand, Zambia, Botswana, and Mali have a lower life expectancy than Ethiopia. Per capita GDP is 6th from the bottom for all of Africa. But Ethiopia is still ahead of countries like Tanzania and Malawi. Ethiopia's very large and overwhelmingly rural population (85 percent) tends to make the per capita statistics appear a little worse than they really are. Poverty is a huge problem, but it is important to keep it in perspective.

Ethiopia continues to experience serious, periodic food shortages and at more frequent intervals. It is unable to feed its entire people even in a good crop year. There is a structural food deficit in the country that affects about five million people annually. At 2.5 percent, Ethiopia has a relatively high population growth rate. This adds to the difficulty of achieving food security and economic growth. It depends heavily on one crop—coffee—for foreign exchange income. This also limits its ability to expand the economy, especially when the international price for coffee drops. To some extent chat, a narcotic, is replacing coffee as the cash crop of choice because it brings in more money for the farmer. But chat is contributing to social problems in Ethiopia.

HIV/AIDS is a major problem. Ethiopia has more HIV positive citizens than any country in the world except South Africa, India, and Nigeria. Nevertheless, the adult prevalence rate is about 5 percent, relatively low by African standards. The good news is that 90 percent of Ethiopians are still HIV-free and the country is now taking major steps to deal with the pandemic.

Like most African countries, Ethiopia has its share of ethnic tension. The Oromo Liberation Front and Ogadeni National Liberation Front continue their campaigns against the government. Ethnic conflict in Gambela during the past two years underscores the fragility of the situation in western Ethiopia and traditional Somali-Afar conflict has the same effect in southeastern Ethiopia. Ethiopia is located on a Christian-Islamic fault line with almost half of the population now being Muslim. Ethiopia has managed so far to avoid serious religious conflict, but the potential exists for problems to develop. Both of these situations contribute to long-standing human rights violations.

On balance Ethiopia has important strengths and worrisome weaknesses. Although Ethiopia does not have Nigeria's oil, South Africa's economic power or Egypt's political clout, it has sufficient other positive characteristics and a long history of close ties with the U.S. to put it in the top rank of African countries of interest to Washington.

The May 15 national elections constitute the most important upcoming event in Ethiopia. The way the election is conducted and the outcome will tell us much about the progress or lack thereof on democratization in the country. Some 35 parties are contesting at least some seats in the 547-member lower house known as the Council of People's Representatives. Voters will also elect representatives in nine regional state parliaments that will, in turn, appoint members of the 112-seat upper house known as the Council of Federation. The ruling party and affiliated groups now hold 519 of the 547 seats in the lower house.

The run-up to the election has had both positive and negative developments. So far, the positives have been more important than the negatives. There has been a lively discussion in the media representing all points of view. There have been a few debates involving the government party and some of the opposition parties. The government invited outside organizations to observe the campaign period and actual election. More than 300 international observers will be present, including about 200 from the European Union. This is the third largest EU delegation ever assembled after the one sent to Indonesia and Nigeria.

On the other hand, ruling party views still prevail on government-controlled radio and television. In April the National Election Board established new rules that said local groups must be registered as election observers at the time they were originally established before they could function in that role for the May election. This ruled out many of the groups. They took the matter to Ethiopia's High Court, which recently overturned the decision. The government is appealing, however, and there may not be enough time left to resolve the matter before the election. The government did agree to consider registering about ten local groups that met the election observer criteria at the time of their original incorporation.

More inexplicably, the government asked three American organizations—National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems—to leave the country on short notice because they had not been properly registered. This decision helped to sour relations with the U.S. At the same time, Ethiopia welcomed a delegation of about 50 election observers from the Carter Center, including former President Carter.

With the election only a week and a half away, it is pointless to judge now its impact on the democratization process. This can be done after we have the benefit of the conclusions of both local and international observers. The election results, of course, will also be telling. Gains for opposition and independent candidates will suggest the democratization process is moving in the right direction.

Perhaps the most contentious issue of the day is the continuing dispute over demarcation of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border. The problem is, in fact, much greater than the demarcation of the border and involves the totality of the Ethiopian-Eritrean relationship both today and since 1991. In an ideal situation, Ethiopia would accept the binding arbitration of the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission and the two countries would then resolve their many other differences. But like so many inter-state problems, this is not an ideal situation.

Prime Minister Meles proposed on 25 November 2004 a five point plan that said, among other things, "Ethiopia accepts, in principle, the Ethiopia-Eritrea Boundary Commission decision." This was a change in policy and opened the door a crack for a possible breakthrough in the stalemate. The statement also noted, however, that dialogue should begin immediately with the goal of implementing the Boundary Commission's

decision. Eritrea quickly rejected the five-point plan as nothing new and took the position that demarcation should take place first, followed by dialogue. The deadlock continues.

The problem has become complicated recently by suggestions from the Eritrean side that Ethiopia's unwillingness to accept the demarcation decision will lead to war. There is, however, no reason for Ethiopia to initiate war. It holds those parts of the border awarded to Eritrea by the Boundary Commission. The United Nations force continues to monitor the 15-mile buffer zone, all of which is located in territory administered by Eritrea prior to the 1998 war. The buffer zone separates Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. Nor does Ethiopia wish to risk international opprobrium by attacking Eritrea. So long as this dispute remains a public shouting match, however, there is virtually no chance it will be resolved. It is at the point where only quiet, behind the scenes discussions, preferably assisted by the good offices of an outside party acceptable to both sides, will achieve a solution.

Another issue that will soon impact the Ethiopian-American relationship is Ethiopia's need for more emergency food aid. The problem is becoming particularly acute in the pastoral areas of Afar and Somali regions. The current situation follows the pattern of the 2002-2003 emergency. This comes as something of a surprise because the government has been touting the good harvest of 2004. Unfortunately, a change in the way cereal production is calculated gave the impression that a normal harvest in 2004 was a bumper one. International partners will have to gear up one more time to deal with the crisis. USAID is already making plans. This underscores the fact, however, that the U.S. is a reliable partner in efforts to avert a serious, new problem. This year the problem appears to be widespread in the region. Eritrea is experiencing a major shortfall in the availability of cereals. An estimated one million Somalis in Somalia will need assistance. Small amounts of food aid may also be required for Kenya and Djibouti.

In order to emphasize the complex nature of the Ethiopian-American relationship, it is useful to cite the annual State Department report on terrorism released last month that covers 2004. It states that "Ethiopia's support in the global war on terrorism has been consistently solid and unwavering." It commends Ethiopia for cooperating in the sharing of information with the U.S. on terrorist activities, for installing new security systems at Addis Ababa airport that allow the tracking of terrorists, and for introducing a new and more secure passport that includes anti-tampering features.

Finally, Ethiopian Airlines signed an agreement with Boeing last month for the purchase of five Boeing 787 aircraft over the next three years with an option to purchase five more. Ethiopian Airlines will be the first African airline to use the new Boeing 787. The agreement is worth at least \$600 million and as much as \$1.3 billion.

All these points underscore my opening remark that it is impossible to measure the state of Ethiopian-American relations based on one issue. They must be seen in their totality. Both countries will continue to disagree on some matters, occasionally important ones, but history suggests the overall relationship will survive the bumps in the road.

